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ABSTRACT

Intended for high school literature teachers, this book reviews research in educational psychology and reading comprehension, and outlines classroom activities for direct instruction and practice of interpretive strategies. The book cites studies which reveal that if teachers distrust students' ability to interpret literature effectively, they may dominate classroom discussion and bore students by confining them to short answers. It describes direct-teaching experiments in which students' comprehension of literature improved when they were taught to distinguish between different kinds of questions. The book discusses research in which students successfully used a set of questions to detect irony in literature, and offers another set of questions to help students understand that in fiction, they will encounter fallible narrators. The book maintains that discussions, small-group work, and other activities help students get below the surface of literature, relate it to life, and move toward independent interpretations. The book offers interpretive units constructed around three short stories, and provides checklists, reproducible handouts, and a bibliography. (MG)

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THEORY & RESEARCH INTO PRACTICE

# Understanding Unreliable Narrators

## Reading between the Lines in the Literature Classroom

Michael W. Smith

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## Reading between the Lines in the Literature Classroom

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CS213504

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# 1 Theory and Research

An articulate and concerned observer of American education, Father Guido Sarducci, formerly of the TV show "Saturday Night Live," made a modest proposal for a Five-Minute University. He suggested a curriculum that teaches only what students will remember in five years. Spanish I, for example, would become "¿Cómo está usted?"

When I heard the good father's routine, I laughed, but I was also disturbed, for it referred to something that had always bothered me about the way I taught literature when I compared it to the way I taught composition. When I taught composition, I was always certain that I was teaching my students about more than the particular composition on which we were working. I was confident that my unit on descriptive writing, for example, would help my students note salient details, use evocative figures, and appeal to a number of the readers' senses—skills that would serve them well regardless of the sort of description they chose to write. But I felt no such confidence when I looked honestly at the way I taught literature. I was certain that my students learned the contents of particular texts. I knew that they felt freer about exchanging ideas and comparing their personal responses to those of their classmates. But I was not certain that I was teaching them anything that they could consciously transfer to new reading situations. I was afraid that the five-minute version of my Introduction to Literature class would require students to remember a few authors' names, the definition of a few literary terms, and a generalization or two about a few works.

Recent research on classroom discussions of literature strongly suggests that my experience is the rule and not the exception. For example, James Marshall (1989) found that teachers do little to help their students develop the skills they need to create meanings. Instead, as he explained:

> The general pattern seemed to be one of students contributing to an interpretive agenda implied by [the teachers'] questions. [The students'] responses tended to be relatively brief and unelaborated; their questions relatively few. Both individually and as a group, they cooperated with the teacher in organizing and sustaining an

> examination of the text, but the direction and content of that examination was usually in the teacher's control. . . . While the goal expressed by teachers was to help students toward a point where they individually develop a reasoned response to a text, we saw in the classrooms we observed few occasions where students could practice such interpretive skills . . . (44)

George Hillocks (1989) found similar patterns of discourse in a class taught by an expert in poetry. In the transcript of the discussion Hillocks analyzed, the teacher (he calls her Ms. A) had 81 percent of the lines of the discussion, and 67 percent of the students' lines consisted of three or fewer words.

What might account for such patterns of discourse? Ms. A gives voice to a belief that might provide an explanation. Students, she said, "do not have enough depth to find many meanings." Thus a Catch-22 situation occurs: Students cannot learn to read literature because they do not get a chance to do it, and teachers will not allow them to do it because students do not know how.

### Some Possible Solutions

Although substantial bodies of research are developing on how students respond to literature and how literature is currently taught, few of these studies investigate the effects of various instructional approaches. Therefore, when I began to consider how I could teach my students to read literature, I looked to other disciplines for suggestions. And my search was rewarded, for research in educational psychology and in reading comprehension suggests a promising approach. Educational psychologist Gavriel Salomon (1987) refers to it as taking the "high road" to learning. He explains that the high road of learning involves

> much deliberate effortful utilization of non-automatic processes; it is a mentally demanding route to the acquisition of knowledge and skill. . . . The high road of learning . . . is . . . typical of explicit instruction aimed at activating non-automatic strategies . . . with materials that afford mindful reflection, consideration of alternatives and the like. It is taken when tasks are demanding and cannot be carried out by reliance on well-mastered skills. (18)

Salomon's insight is one which researchers on metacognition in reading have been exploring for a number of years.

Baker and Brown (1984) define the term metacognition as follows: "Metacognition involves at least two separate components: (1) an awareness of what skills, strategies and resources are needed to perform a task effectively; and (2) the ability to use self-regulatory mechanisms

to ensure successful completion of the task" (22). A variety of studies demonstrates the power of students' developing metacognitive awareness. For example, Raphael and Pearson (1982), and later Raphael, Wonnacott, and Pearson (1983), found that metacognitive training in strategies for responding to questions appeared to enhance children's performance on comprehension tasks, both when the strategies were taught by the researchers and when the teachers themselves taught the strategies under the researchers' supervision. The instruction involved teaching students to recognize and generate answers to literal questions, to inferences contained in the text, and to inferences that derive from the reader's store of prior knowledge. These researchers found that students got better at (1) discriminating between different types of questions, (2) evaluating their own question-answering behavior, and (3) giving quality responses. Brown, Palincsar, and Armbruster (1984) taught seventh graders who were poor comprehenders four comprehension strategies: summarizing, questioning, clarifying, and predicting. The researchers gave explicit instruction on the use of each of the strategies; they then modeled their use and gave students a chance to practice them. The ten students who participated in the instruction all showed significant improvement in answering comprehension questions. In a subsequent study, teachers used the same training procedure in their own classes and found similar results.

Brown, Bransford, Campione, and Ferrara (1983) offer the following summary of the findings from this line of research:

> If we consider a number of instructional experiments that have included groups of students differing in age or ability and that have involved manipulation of the complexity of the skills being taught, a general pattern begins to emerge. The most basic point is that poor performance often results in a failure of the learner to bring to bear specific routines or skills important for optimal performance. In this case, readers need to be taught explicitly what those rules are. This, in turn, requires a detailed theoretical analysis of the domain in question; otherwise, we cannot specify the skills in sufficient detail to enable instruction. (140–41)

## A Look at Literature

Of course, reading literature is a complicated task, vastly more complicated than reading the expository prose used in the studies discussed above. So the question must be asked: Can we specify the skills it takes to read literature? Literary critic Jonathan Culler (1981) would argue yes:

> The whole institution of literary education depends on the assumption . . . that one can learn to become a more competent reader and that there is something (a series of techniques and procedures) to be learned. We do not judge students simply on what they know about a given work; we presume to evaluate their skill and progress as readers, and that presumption ought to indicate our confidence in the existence of public and generalizable operations of reading. (125)

So, too, would Robert Scholes (1985), who maintains:

> The point of teaching interpretation is not to usurp the interpreter's role but to explain the rules of the interpretive game. . . . These rules are common to all within academic institutions, as the rules of chess are common to all chess players. Therefore, we must teach the rules, and we must also teach the principles and procedures that lead to strong interpretive positions. (30)

Margaret Meek (1983) puts it quite nicely when she argues that, as teachers, we need to share the "list of secret things that all accomplished readers know, yet never talk about" (cited in Thomson 1987, 109).

Three recent studies inspired by this research and theory suggest that if teachers share their secrets, their students will benefit. In one study (1989), I examined the effects of direct instruction in interpretive strategies on students' understanding of irony in poetry. To devise the instruction, I had to begin with a detailed theoretical analysis of the domain in question, as Brown and her colleagues suggest. And I was fortunate because Wayne Booth had already done that analysis in *A Rhetoric of Irony* (1974). Booth's work exemplifies the type of analysis that Brown and her colleagues call for. It establishes that by narrowing one's focus to a particular type of literature or a particular discourse convention, one can indeed detail specifically the routines and skills needed for optimal performance.

Booth explains that the first step to interpreting irony is to recognize when a speaker or author is being ironic. He says we do this by recognizing one or more of five clues. The first is a *straightforward warning* in the author's own voice. Booth cites three basic ways authors can give such warnings: in titles, in epigraphs, and in other direct clues. A second clue occurs when an author has his or her speaker *proclaim a known error,* perhaps the misstatement of a popular expression, an error in historical fact, or a rejection of a conventional judgment. Though Booth does not discuss them, illogical expressions would also be subsumed by this clue. A third clue is the existence of *conflicts within a work.* Booth cites Pope's *The Rape of the Lock:*

> Now lap-dogs give themselves the rousing shake,
> And sleepless lovers, just at twelve, awake.

Unless Pope is unaware that sleepless lovers cannot awake (a possibility we cannot accept), he must be using irony.

A fourth clue is a *clash of style*. Booth explains that whenever the language of a speaker is clearly not the same as the language of the author, we must be alert for the presence of irony. For example, from the first sentence of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, we are aware of the distance between Twain and Huck. Consequently, we attend to Huck's words with some suspicion. Other examples of this clue would be understatements and exaggerations. The final clue, according to Booth, is a *conflict of belief*: The speaker espouses a belief that the author cannot endorse; thus we perceive irony. It is this conflict of belief that most clearly informs Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal." While Booth does not discuss it in *A Rhetoric of Irony*, he believes that this clue also includes behavior by a speaker that the author could not endorse (1985, personal communication). In either case, the reader must bring to bear standards from outside the text onto the world of the text, proceeding from the belief that the author does not hold alien values.

But merely recognizing the existence of irony, and so rejecting the surface meaning of a text, is not the same as reconstructing ironic meanings. To understand how that reconstruction occurs, I turned from Booth's analysis to a self-study of how I read ironic texts. When I read Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess," for example, I reject the surface meaning of the poem—the duke's assessment of his wife's death—because I know that Browning simply could not endorse the duke's behavior. But I do not reject all of the information the duke presents. For example, I am not suspicious when I read the duke's description of his wife's easy smile and joy in life. While his defense of his actions is suspicious, I do not believe that the duke is lying or being ironic when he explains that he would not "stoop" to speak with her about her behavior. I also recognize his great pride in his title. In addition, the occasion of the poem is not under dispute; the duke is talking to an emissary from a count about a proposed marriage. Because I have confidence in these facts of the poem, I can use them as the basis of my interpretation. The duchess seems wonderful to me. The duke behaves like other self-centered people I have known. I also know that people do not allude to illegal acts unless they have a reason; therefore, it seems to me that the duke is willing to expose his guilt to make his expectations of the count's daughter clear. Putting it all together, it seems obvious that Browning must be criticizing this murderous egotist. Now I check this meaning to see if it jibes with my knowledge of Browning. It does. Browning's monologues often

reveal speakers who are blind to their own vices. To reconstruct ironic meanings, then, it seems that readers go through the following four-step process:

1. Rejecting the surface meaning;
2. Deciding what is not under dispute in the work;
3. Applying their knowledge of the world to generate a reconstructed meaning; and, if possible,
4. Checking the reconstructed meaning against their knowledge of the author.

The instruction in my study was designed to give students conscious control over this approach to understanding irony. It sought first to build students' awareness of the five clues by examining five cartoons by James Thurber, each of which makes its irony clear through the use of a different clue. In the discussion of these cartoons, the instruction highlighted and made explicit the steps that readers go through in reconstructing meaning after they have rejected the surface meaning of a text. Students went on to examine five to ten examples of each clue in separate worksheets. Then they focused on the steps of reconstruction in two worksheets. With this preparation, they applied the principles they had learned to their interpretation of popular songs. Finally, students moved on to the interpretation of ironic poetry. Students analyzed the first four poems with the aid of worksheets, the questions on which highlighted the clues and aided students in reconstructing meaning. After students wrote an ironic monologue, they analyzed four poems on their own—without the aid of supporting questions—and then wrote an essay on understanding irony. Finally, they worked on a lesson designed to help them discriminate between what is and what is not ironic. (See Appendix A for an example of an introductory worksheet, a worksheet on one poem, and a helpsheet for independent work.)

The one class of ninth graders, two classes of tenth graders, and one class of eleventh graders that received this treatment showed a statistically significant increase in their ability to understand ironic poetry. The effect was most notable on the ninth graders, which makes sense; for these readers were the least able in the study, and as Salomon (1987) points out, gaining conscious control of one's learning is most important when one cannot rely on already-mastered skills.

Hillocks (1989) explored the impact of a similar unit of instruction by using a different measure, the patterns of discourse in classroom discussions. Hillocks noted a stark contrast between the patterns of

discourse in the classroom of Ms. A, the teacher who spoke of the limitations of her students, and that of Mr. B, who taught a unit very similar to the one described above:

> Mr. B has only 54 percent of the lines compared to Ms. A's 81. Of the student lines in Mr. B's class only 14 percent are of three or fewer words as compared with 67 percent in Ms. A's class. Forty-seven percent of the student responses are more than one line in Mr. B's class as compared to none in Ms. A's class. In Mr. B's class the three students with the most responses have 42.5 percent of the responses, far fewer than the three with the most responses in Ms. A's class, who have 67 percent. In Mr. B's class the remaining responses are fairly evenly distributed with no student responding fewer than five times. (155)

Whereas Ms. A's students depended on her to provide the structure for the discussion and, indeed, to do most of the analysis, Mr. B's students were grappling on their own with sophisticated literary concepts. The instruction they received prepared them to interpret literature independently of their teacher.

In a second study, David Anderson (1988) examined the effect of giving students direct instruction in the interpretive strategies which experienced readers use to understand drama. Basing his instruction on Martin Esslin's (1987) semiotic analysis of drama, Anderson gave students direct instruction in making inferences about plays on the basis of five sources of implication: front matter, set directions, technical directions, dialogue, and stage directions. Students practiced making inferences about each source of implication in prereading activities that highlighted how much they could learn if they attended to that source of implication. They then applied what they had learned to the reading of a series of one-act plays. Students who received direct instruction improved significantly both in the quality of their inferences and in the quality of the evidence they used to support their inferences.

In a third study (1990), I examined the effect of helping students gain conscious control of interpretive strategies on the stance they take when they read literature. The study was motivated by my experience with students who were submissive to texts—students who, instead of asserting their authority as interpreters, counted on the text to do all the work. These were the students who did not make inferences and who focused only on literal information. They never questioned the source from which they received the information in a story, and they could not control the associations engendered by texts. In the study, students received instruction designed to help them develop strategies for understanding unreliable narrators, instruction that I will

fully explain in the practice section of this book. The study suggests that the instruction reduced some students' submission to the text, a finding based on an analysis of the think-aloud protocols they recorded as they read two stories both before and after the instruction.

A look at one student's response to "The Liar," one of the stories used in the study, reveals the dramatic effect that such instruction can have. "The Liar" is a story of a minister's family, narrated by a young girl who is the minister's daughter's best friend. The narrator explains how much she likes playing at the minister's house, for the minister's wife has tea parties with the girls as though she were one of them. The narrator describes the minister's house, focusing especially on the vinegar cruets the minister's wife collects, one of which is her "special tea-time favorite." According to the narrator, the liar in the story is the minister's son, who complains how difficult it is to live with his family and tells of the "sins" his mother has committed. Through the course of the story, readers are invited to understand that the son is not a liar at all, that the minister's strictness made life difficult for his family and caused his wife to seek solace in something stronger than vinegar. The narrator's father, a less religious man who is a model of love, provides a counterpoint to the minister. This is how the reader concluded her protocol on "The Liar" before she received the instruction:

> What the hell was this story about? I mean, it sounds like, everyone who's in this preacher or minister's family is like, some kind of awful sinner who's damned and is gonna go to hell. I'm sorry this story, er, didn't even make sense. Something about these people totally sinning, and now they're damned sinners. They sound awfully psycho to me.

Instead of being an active interpreter of the story, this girl, a freshman whose grade equivalency on the school's standardized reading test was beyond the twelfth grade, blamed the story for not making sense, blamed it for not making the connections she failed to make. After the instruction, she exercised much more control:

> Why do they put such a high title, minister's son, I mean so what? Cause he's a normal person like everyone else. He's not any better. I mean, if anything it sounds like he's [the minister's] worse. He sounds like the strict dictator over the entire family. But, this, sounds like one of those fam, one of these stories that takes place like, way back when, but still has like, a modern sort of insight into it, I mean it's showing that those, all those you know, God-fearing families aren't all what they're cracked up to be. But, sort of cynical . . . story.

Quite clearly, after the instruction, she began to trust her own assessment of the characters instead of relying on the judgments of the narrator and the other characters. Instead of being limited to the world of the story, she moved beyond it to make a thematic generalization. She also passed judgment on it. Instead of being submissive to the text, she asserted control over it.

## Reflections on Putting Strategies at the Center of Literary Studies

When I think about teaching literature now, I feel much more comfortable. Making interpretive strategies the center of instruction teaches students something they can transfer to new reading situations. When students have acquired the strategies, they seem to be more confident in their responses, as reflected in the patterns of discourse in Mr. B's class and the protocol response of the ninth-grade girl. As one teacher who made interpretive strategies the center of her course explained:

> Organizing my class around interpretive strategies was a benefit to me and my students. It made my job easier and more entertaining. My students understood how they went about developing their interpretations. This gave them the confidence to respond freely and the ability to respond with surprising sophistication. I felt that my own readings were enriched by their responses. And it made me feel good to know that they could apply what they had learned to new reading situations. My final exam asked students to respond to a work we had not discussed in class. The results convinced me that I had given them valuable knowledge that they would use instead of a body of information they would soon forget. (Smith & Hillocks 1989, 47–48)

As the examples discussed above make clear, the first step to developing instruction around interpretive strategies is to identify the "public and generalizable operations of reading" which experienced readers employ in specific situations. The next step is to introduce students to those strategies, to provide experiences that demonstrate the impact that applying the strategies can have upon their interpretations. After the introduction, students need to practice making use of the strategies. At this stage it is likely that the teacher's guidance will be necessary. Finally, students must have a chance to move to independence, to apply the strategies to new reading and writing situations.

*A Comparison to Traditional Instruction*

The model of instruction above differs substantially from traditional instruction in the "elements" of literature, at least as evidenced in current anthologies, whose instruction in these "elements" of literature does little to prepare students to cope with the complexities involved in understanding literary texts. Consider, for example, *point of view*. Most anthologies provide a definition of the term and of different points of view. For example, the 1984 edition of *The Macmillan Handbook of English* defines *point of view* as "the relationship of the storyteller, or narrator, to the story." It defines first-person, limited third-person, and omniscient, or third-person, points of view. And typically, the primary goal of anthologies is to have students apply these definitions in simply mechanical ways, as the questions that accompany the section reviewing point of view in Scott, Foresman's ninth-grade anthology *Patterns in Literature* (1989) reveal:

1. What is the point of view in "Blues Ain't No Mockin Bird"? Explain your answer.
2. What are the other stories you have read in this unit that have the same point of view as "Blues Ain't No Mockin Bird"?

This is a very reductive approach; it is easy to label the point of view of a particular story. But understanding point of view is far more complicated. This is true even in works traditionally taught to students in introductory literature classes. For example, the point of view of Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* places tremendous demands on its readers because of the way it shifts through the course of the novel. In the first chapter, Scout, the narrator, comments, "Maycomb was an old town, but it was a tired old town when I first knew it." And we believe her, for she explains that she tells the story after "enough years have gone by to enable us to look back on them." We know that we are benefiting from her mature reflection on her experiences. Nine chapters later she begins with another judgment: "Atticus was feeble: he was nearly fifty." And here we question her judgment, for we recognize this voice as that of an inexperienced child, not that of a reflective adult. We are on the alert for details that would undercut her opinion. *To Kill a Mockingbird* requires its readers to be constantly aware of the shifting voice of the narrator and to reconstruct actively the meaning of events we see through the eyes of the young Scout, a narrator whose judgment is suspect because of her youth.

Applying definitions does little to help students sort out when they can rely on Scout's judgments and when they cannot. To develop a unit to help students understand unreliable narrators, we must do a more thorough analysis. The practice section begins with that analysis.

# Appendix A
# Three Worksheets from an Experimental Approach to Irony

**Worksheet 1: Clashes of Style**

Whenever the speaker says something in a way that the poet wouldn't, the poem may be ironic. For each of the items below, explain whether it would make you think the poem is ironic. One of the items is from a poem that isn't ironic, so be careful.

1. Allen Ginsberg, from "America":
   Them Russians them Russians and them Chinamen. And them Russians.
   The Russia wants to eat us alive. The Russia's power mad. She wants to take our cars from out our garages.
2. Langston Hughes, from "50-50":
   Big Boy opened up his mouth and said,
   Trouble with you is
   You ain't got no head!
   If you had a head and used your mind
   You could have *me* with you
   All the time.
3. Robert Frost, from "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening":
   Whose woods these are I think I know.
   His house is in the village though;
   He will not see me stopping here
   To watch his woods fill up with snow.
4. Edgar Lee Masters, from "Frank Drummer":
   Out of a cell into this darkened space—
   The end at twenty-five!
   My tongue could not speak what stirred within me,
   And the village thought me a fool.
   Yet at the start there was a clear vision,
   A high and urgent purpose in my soul

Which drove me on trying to memorize
The Encyclopedia Brittanica!

5. Steve Schroer, from "Perseveration":
These maniacs can be such
Nuisances. . . .

**Worksheet 2**

The Idiot

"That cop was powerful mean.
First he called me, 'Black boy.'
Then he punched me in the face
and drug me by the collar to a wall
and made me lean against it with my hands
spread while he searched me,
and all the time he searched me
he kicked me and cuffed me and cussed me.

I was mad enough
to lay him out,
and would've did it, only
I didn't want to hurt his feelings,
and lose the good will
of the good white folks downtown,
who hired him."

—Dudley Randall

1. What is the title of the poem? What might that imply about the relationship between the speaker and the author? Which of the five clues does that relate to? What do the quotation marks tell us? Which of the five clues does that relate to?
2. What did the police officer do? What is the police officer's attitude toward blacks? How do you know?
3. What did the speaker want to do? What two reasons does he give for why he didn't do it? What do you think about his reasoning? Which of the five clues does that relate to?
4. Reconstructing meaning: Do you know anything about the author that might help you reconstruct the meaning? What isn't under dispute? What does your experience tell you about such situations?
5. Who is the idiot?
6. According to the author, how should the speaker have acted? Defend your answer. Do you agree with Randall?

**Worksheet 3: Helpsheet for Independent Work**

Does the author give any warnings in his own voice that the poem is ironic?

Are there known errors proclaimed?

Are there conflicts of facts within the work?

Are there clashes of style?

Are there conflicts in belief? That is, does the speaker hold beliefs or behave in a way of which the author would not approve?

Decision: Should I reject the surface meaning of the poem?

What is not under dispute in the work?

What do I know about situations such as these?

What do I know about the author that may help me reconstruct the meaning?

Reconstructed meaning:

# 2 Practice

## Analyzing the Domain in Question

If we are to teach our students the "rules of the interpretive game," as Scholes (1985) suggests, we must first identify them. And as Brown et al. argue, this identification requires a "detailed theoretical analysis of the domain in question," a fact made clear when we realize with Linda Flower (1987) that "much of our discourse knowledge is happily tacit" (5). I have found that examining the work of literary critics and analyzing my own reading have helped me raise my tacit knowledge to my consciousness.

### *A Look at Literary Criticism*

The classic work on narrative technique is Wayne Booth's *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1983). In it he explains: "To say that a story is told in the first or third person will tell us nothing of importance unless we become more precise and describe how the particular qualities of the narrators relate to specific effects" (150). He explains further: "Perhaps the most important differences in narrative effect depend on whether the narrator is dramatized in his own right and on whether his beliefs and characteristics are shared by the author" (151). Booth introduces the concept of *distance* to explain. He writes: "In any reading experience there is an implied dialogue among author, narrator, the other characters, and the reader. Each of the four can range, in relation to each of the others, from identification to complete opposition, on any axis of value, moral, intellectual, aesthetic, and even physical" (155). After discussing and giving examples of these possible differences in types of distance, Booth notes:

> For practical criticism probably the most important of these kinds of distance is that between the fallible or unreliable narrator and the implied author who carries the reader with him in judging the narrator. If the reason for discussing point of view is to find out how it relates to literary effects, then surely the moral and intellectual qualities of the narrator are more important to our judgment than whether he is referred to as "I" or "he," or whether

> he is privileged or limited. If he is discovered to be untrustworthy, then the total effect of the work he relays to us is transformed. (158)

*A Look in the Mirror*

How do readers determine the distance between authors and their dramatized narrators? To help answer that question, I considered how I respond to stories with unreliable narrators. For example, Truman Capote's "My Side of the Matter" begins as follows: "I know what is being said about me and you can take my words or theirs, that's your own business. It's my word against Eunice's and Olivia-Ann's, and it should be plain enough to anyone with two good eyes which one of us has their wits about them. I just want the good citizens of the U.S.A. to know the facts, that's all." Will we get "the facts" from this narrator? It is not likely; his self-interest is too great for him to be objective. From the start of the story, I am on the alert. My response suggests that I have a system of warning buttons so that when narrators demonstrate certain characteristics, like self-interest, I am suspicious of their reliability.

Of course, most unreliable narrators do not announce their unreliability so loudly. And, like Scout, even unreliable narrators are not necessarily always unreliable. Therefore, when I read stories with dramatized first-person narrators, I constantly evaluate and reevaluate their reliability. Examining my response to a variety of texts helped me realize that I have a repertoire of questions to help me make this evaluation. The most important of those questions seem to be the following:

1. Is the narrator too self-interested to be reliable?
2. Is the narrator sufficiently experienced to be reliable?
3. Is the narrator sufficiently knowledgeable to be reliable?
4. Is the narrator sufficiently moral to be reliable?
5. Is the narrator too emotional to be reliable?
6. Are the narrator's actions too inconsistent with his or her words to make him or her reliable?

If the answer to any of these questions is yes, then readers must be on the alert; they must not readily accept the interpretations of the narrator. They must instead be active interpreters of the situation of the text. But to make this interpretation, they have to have something

to rely on. As I explained earlier in the discussion of irony, my analysis of the way I responded to "My Last Duchess" made me aware that I begin my interpretations by determining the facts of the situation. Then I apply my knowledge of the world and of the author to those facts.

Unfortunately, our students tend not to make these sorts of reconstructions. They are often passive recipients of what narrators relate. Instead of adjusting their style of response to meet the demands of texts told by an unreliable narrator, I found in a recent study (in press) that students appear to have a personal style of response, a finding in line with the research of Kintgen (1983) and Galda (1982). If students respond to stories with unreliable narrators in essentially the same way they respond to other stories, their interpretations will suffer, for as van Dijk and Kintsch (1983) note, "New types of discourse and forms of communication may require the development of new strategies" (11). The lessons that follow are designed to help students develop those new strategies.

### Introducing the Concept of Unreliable Narrators

Our students bring to our classes a wealth of knowledge about human behavior and a highly developed capacity to make the sorts of inferences most critical to understanding literature. I was often surprised at how well my students "read" me. I'd hear, "Watch out; he's in a bad mood," on the basis of a quick glance into the room during the passing period. I'd hear students translate my "You're really going to enjoy the challenge of this next story" on the basis of their knowledge of me, saying to each other, "He means it's going to be hard." Quite clearly, students are able to make judgments about people's feelings and character with only subtle clues to guide them. And they are able to reconstruct the meaning of statements based on what they know about the speaker. Yet they often fail to apply these abilities when they read literature. Perhaps they believe that literature is something unrelated to their lives. Perhaps their experience with objective tests that ask questions about unimportant details has made them question their abilities. Consequently, an effective way to introduce students to a literary skill is to demonstrate that they already have that skill. Nothing motivates like success. That is why I suggest beginning the unit on unreliable narrators with a genre that students enjoy and have confidence in their ability to understand: cartoons.

*Using Cartoons to Introduce the Concept of Unreliable Narrators*

Explain to students that they will be working on a new unit for the next three weeks or so and that it is always a good idea to warm up before one starts something. Explain that they will be warming up by looking at cartoons. Distribute the "Doonesbury" and "Calvin and Hobbes" cartoons. Have students read the "Doonesbury" cartoon, and then ask them the following questions:

1. Did Mike's nephew really suffer all those injuries?
2. Did a squad of Nazi frogmen break into the room?
3. If none of these things happened, why was Mike's nephew so late in writing?
4. Why don't you believe Mike's nephew?

In the discussion, students should remark that they do not believe the nephew because he is just making excuses. Make the point that when a person's interest is involved in a statement, we regard that statement cautiously. Explain the process that students went through to reconstruct the meaning:

1. They evaluated the reliability of the source of information.
2. They checked the facts of the situation (in this case, that the thank-you was very late and that the present was a tie).
3. They applied their knowledge of the world (in this case, their knowledge of excuses and children's imaginations).

Write this three-step process on the board and have the students write it in their notebooks.

Move on to the "Calvin and Hobbes" cartoons, and ask the following questions:

1. Does Calvin like Susie Derkins?
2. How do we know that Calvin doesn't really want Susie to suffer a "debilitating brain aneurysm"?

In the discussion, students should note that Calvin's actions give lie to his words: He notices the new girl, he complains too loudly that he does not like her, and he calls out to her. Note that the consistency of people's words and actions helps us understand whether or not to believe them. Review the three-step process students went through to understand that Calvin really does like Susie:

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THERE'S A NEW GIRL IN OUR CLASS.
WELL! WHAT'S HER NAME?
WHO KNOWS?
IS SHE NICE?
WHO CARES? NOT ME!
DO YOU LIKE HER??
NO!
HERE COMES THAT NEW GIRL.
HEY SUSIE DERKINS, IS THAT YOUR FACE, OR IS A 'POSSUM STUCK IN YOUR COLLAR?
I HOPE YOU SUFFER A DEBILITATING BRAIN ANEURYSM, YOU FREAK!
SHE'S CUTE, ISN'T SHE??
GO AWAY.



*Calvin & Hobbes* copyright 1986 Universal Press Syndicate. Reprinted with permission. All rights reserved.

1. They determined that Calvin wasn't reliable: his words and behavior were inconsistent.
2. They checked the facts: in this case, Calvin's actions.
3. They applied their knowledge of the world: in this case, how young boys and young girls relate and the motive for too-loud protests.

Explain that over the next few weeks, the students will be applying this three-step process to a series of stories. (Note: I eliminated the step of checking the interpretation against the reader's knowledge of the author because so few students knew any of the authors in the unit.) Encourage students to ask questions.

*The Transition to Texts*

The introductory work with the cartoons should establish two important ideas. First, it should help students recognize that, as a matter of course in their daily lives, they evaluate the reliability of speakers and reconstruct meanings when they suspect that a speaker is unreliable. Such awareness is important, for it makes it impossible for students to dismiss the subsequent instruction as something they are doing only because their teacher tells them to. Second, the work with the cartoons should make explicit the thought process they go through in order to make those evaluations and reconstructions. This is important, for as Flower (1987) notes: "The strategic knowledge that is now tacit for us . . . is often the object of cognition for our students" (6). The research and theory reported earlier clarifies the positive effects of articulating this strategic knowledge.

The next step of the introduction is to help students understand the characteristics that may make narrators unreliable. To do this I ask students to read a series of short monologues and to consider the reliability of the narrators of those monologues. These narrators reflect the characteristics that my self-study helped me realize were most important in alerting me that a narrator might not be reliable. So that students do not simply dismiss all of the narrators, in one of the monologues I intended that the narrator be reliable. I wrote the monologues myself rather than using literary texts for a couple of reasons. First, it is difficult to find texts sufficiently short and easy to allow students to practice their interpretive strategies without the interference of other issues, for example, vocabulary. Second, writing the monologues myself helped me focus specifically on the characteristics of narrators which I thought were most important.

Before students consider the monologues, explain that very often in literature we are told a story by a character who appears in the story. Note that this is called first-person point of view. Explain that the cartoons and our life experience have taught us that not everyone who tells us a story or makes a judgment is reliable. Tell students that whenever they receive information from a character, they need to judge the reliability of that source of information. Explain that the next activity is designed to help students develop criteria on which they should base their decisions about a character's reliability.

Distribute "Whom Do You Trust?" Divide students into heterogeneous groups of four or five to work on the questions. While the groups are working, circulate and offer help as needed.

**Whom Do You Trust?**

Decide whether you trust the judgment of the narrators of the following little stories. Explain what it is about the narrator that makes him or her trustworthy or untrustworthy. If the narrator is unreliable, decide what you think is the truth of the situation. Remember, go through the three-step process to reconstruct the meaning.

1. Oh, man, these teachers. I mean, they got it in for me. Four different teachers send me to the dean in the same month. It must be a conspiracy. And, I tell you, I don't deserve it. Nope. This is just another classic case of discrimination.
    a. Is this a case of discrimination?
    b. What makes the narrator believable/not believable?
    c. What do you think is the truth of the situation? (Remember, if you decided the narrator is unreliable, continue with the three-step process.)
2. The buildings—they are so beautiful. We have nothing like them in my country. And the sun, when it shines on the windows, it is golden. Even the—what are they called—sidewalks. They glisten. Perhaps they have diamonds in them. I am so lucky to be here in Milwaukee. It is surely the most beautiful city in all the world.
    a. Is Milwaukee the most beautiful city in all the world?
    b. What makes the narrator believable/not believable?
    c. What do you think is the truth of the situation? (Remember, if you decided the narrator is unreliable, continue with the three-step process.)

3. Well, today's the day. I have to break up with her. I'm getting kidded all the time by the guys. They say she's not cool enough for me. Just because she dresses a little differently and is so involved in school. And I like her. A lot. But I can't stand the kidding. I'm afraid everyone will start to think I'm not cool enough for them. So I'll just have to tell her I can't see her anymore.
   a. Does the narrator like the girl a lot?
   b. What makes the narrator believable/not believable?
   c. What do you think is the truth of the situation? (Remember, if you decided the narrator is unreliable, continue with the three-step process.)
4. I am worryed because my daughter Joan's english teacher is way to hard. Joan brang home her homework yesterday and I cant even understand it and Im an adult! I think that teacher, he should be fired.
   a. Should the teacher be fired?
   b. What makes the narrator believable/not believable?
   c. What do you think is the truth of the situation? (Remember, if you decided the narrator is unreliable, continue with the three-step process.)
5. Sometimes teachers can be unfair. Take what happened to Jane this afternoon in English. Jane worked so hard on her paper. I was there in the library with her. She finished it last week and asked me to read it. It was, quite frankly, better than mine. Jane had always done solid work, but this was exceptional. She told me that she wanted her final high school project to be a memorable one. It certainly was. When I told her that I thought her work was better than mine, she blushed. She said, "You always get the highest mark in the class, though. And you're the editor of the paper. And you won that writing contest last year. You're just saying that." I reminded her that this was the only time I had ever said it, even though I had read many of her papers over the years. To tell you the truth, it bothered me a little that her paper was better. I was certainly happy for Jane, but I've enjoyed getting praised for doing the best work. This afternoon we got the papers back—two days ahead of schedule. I received my usual A, but I couldn't be happy about it. Jane received her usual B. I saw a tear fall down on the title page. It smeared the grade and the brief sentence beneath it, the only marks on the paper. After class I went up to Mr. Smith's desk.

"Something wrong, Margaret?" he asked. I asked whether he would consider rereading Jane's paper. I told him that I had read it and that I thought it was an exceptional work. He seemed to come unhinged at my request. He started shouting that it wasn't my place to accuse him of being careless. I tried to tell him that I had no such thought, that I realized with so many papers to grade, teachers cannot spend too long with any one paper. I seem to have offended him deeply. He shouted again that he had taken exceptional care with everyone's paper and that I had no right to question his dedication. Now I have a week of detention for my "insubordination." I feel so sorry for Jane. She deserved a better mark. She really did.

   a. Was Mr. Smith unfair?
   b. What makes the narrator believable/unbelievable?
   c. What do you think is the truth of the situation? (Remember, if you decided the narrator is unreliable, continue with the three-step process.)

6. I owe it to the shareholders of this company to make as big a profit as possible. And if that involves forcing aging and expensive employees into quitting, well, that's just the way of the world. Can you believe that one of them sued me? And hired a female lawyer to boot! Age discrimination! What a joke. Just like lady lawyers. Of course, my time is much too valuable to waste it in court. Maybe a bribe. A little cash will certainly make that lady lawyer handle this case, shall we say, a little less aggressively. One thing you can count on: everyone has a price, and for most, that price isn't very high.
   a. Is it certain that the opposing lawyer will handle the case less aggressively?
   b. What makes the narrator believable/not believable?
   c. What do you think is the truth of the situation? (Remember, if you decide the narrator is unreliable, continue with the three-step process.)

7. Of course, I'm upset. Anyone would be. She leaves me for no reason. To take up with that slime. I break into a sweat whenever I think about it. And I think about it. Always. I was so good to her. Three, four, five phone calls a day. Flowers twice a week. And all this after only one date. What more could any woman ask? Now I sit in my car outside her door, watching, waiting, hoping to catch even a glimpse of her. But she's with him. I know that she is. It makes me sweat just to think about it.

a. Was the narrator so good to the woman?
b. What makes the narrator believable/unbelievable?
c. What do you think is the truth of the situation? (Remember, if you decided the narrator is unreliable, continue with the three-step process.)

When the groups have finished their work, discuss the items. For Item 1, students should note that the narrator is not reliable because of his or her self-interest. Students should recognize that the narrator is simply trying to blame his or her troubles on others. Discuss the fact that contributes to this understanding: four different teachers sent the student to the dean. Write "Factors Affecting Reliability" on the board. Write "Self-Interest" beneath it.

For Item 2, students should note that the narrator's inexperience makes him or her unreliable. Write "Lack of Experience" on the board. The discussion should reveal that our knowledge of Milwaukee helps us understand that it is not the city itself, but rather the contrast between the city and the narrator's previous experience that accounts for the narrator's judgment.

For Item 3, students should understand that the narrator's behavior does not support his words and that this inconsistency informs us that the narrator is not reliable. Write "Inconsistency" on the board. Discuss the facts of the situation that help us to recognize this inconsistency: The narrator is breaking up with the girl; if he really liked her, he would not do that.

For Item 4, students should note that the narrator is not very knowledgeable and that this lack of knowledge informs us that the narrator is not reliable. Write "Lack of Knowledge" on the board. Discuss how this criterion could also explain the unreliability of people speaking outside their area of expertise, or the unreliability of people who were not in a position to observe the incident on which they are passing judgment. Note how the facts of the situation help us to understand it: The narrator obviously is unschooled or has had difficulty with school; the narrator seems to be suspicious of something he or she does not understand.

For Item 5, at least some students should determine that the narrator is reliable. Margaret's self-interest is not involved; she is knowledgeable about what she is saying, and she is experienced. Discuss the facts of the situation that help us to understand it: Mr. Smith returns the papers early, he writes only a little on each paper, and he overreacts to Margaret's request. Mr. Smith may have saved time by grading his students on his expectations rather than on their performance.

For Item 6, students should be suspicious of the narrator because of his immorality. Write "Immorality" on the board. Note how the facts of the situation help us to understand it: The narrator plans to offer a bribe, he treats his employees poorly, and he is sexist; we cannot simply accept the judgment of such a person. Explain that a writer who makes a character unlikable often does so for a reason. Note that in our lives we tend to believe people we like and admire and that we tend not to believe those we do not like or admire. Explain that this is also true for literature.

For Item 7, students should recognize the narrator's obsession and reject his judgments because of that obsession. Note other emotional states that might make a narrator unreliable (jealousy, anger, insecurity, etc.). Write "Emotional Involvement" on the board. Note how the facts of the situation help us to understand it: The narrator has clearly done too much for such a new relationship, and his watching and sweating suggest his madness.

Review the six criteria on the board. Make sure that students have written them in their notebooks. Explain that the students should use these criteria to evaluate a narrator's reliability. Remind students that when they are suspicious of a narrator's reliability, they should check the facts and apply their knowledge of the world to understand those facts. Briefly discuss how students can determine the facts. In this discussion, students should note that facts are more reliable than opinions, that the reactions of other characters help identify the facts, and that statements not in a person's self-interest tend to be more believable. Explain to students that they should now be ready to apply what they have learned to a series of short stories.

### Applying Interpretive Strategies

Once students have been introduced to the concept of unreliable narrators and to the strategies experienced readers use to recognize these narrators and to then reconstruct their own judgments, they should be ready to apply these strategies to their reading of stories. However, because the strategies are new, it is unreasonable to expect that students will be able to apply them before they have received guided practice in doing so. To give students that guided practice, I suggest having them discuss a series of stories with the aid of questions that highlight the narrator's characteristics, the steps of reconstructing the narrator's meaning, and the narrator's judgments that may need reconstruction.

*Principles Underlying the Instruction*

To exemplify that approach, I have included worksheets on four stories. A number of principles guided my selection of the stories. Beginning with relatively easy stories is important, for it allows students to devote more of their mental energy to the strategies they are employing rather than to the difficulties they may be having with the text. Consequently, the first two stories in the sequence are told by narrators who are clearly unreliable. They are followed by a story in which the narrator's reliability is less easily established. Since it is important that students do not simply apply the strategies in a perfunctory manner, however, the final story of the sequence features a narrator who is reliable, at least to some extent. A summary of each story precedes a description of the instruction on it. One of the four stories, Zachary Gold's "I Got a Name," is presented in its entirety in Appendix B.

As I explained above, the questions highlight the narrator's characteristics, the steps of reconstructing the narrator's meaning, and the narrator's judgments that may need reconstruction. A number of principles also guided the construction of these questions. Each set of questions includes several that are, in Martin Nystrand's words (in press), "authentic." In other words, the questions do not have prespecified answers. Nystrand's study of instructional discourse establishes that such questions promote depth of understanding. In addition, the questions are designed to help students become engaged in the important issues of the stories, rather than to simply use the stories to illustrate a point.

The Instruction

Remind students that whenever they encounter a story told by a first-person narrator, they should evaluate the reliability of the narrator by asking the six questions they generated in the previous activity:

1. Does the narrator's self-interest make you suspicious of his or her reliability?
2. Is the narrator sufficiently experienced to be reliable?
3. Is the narrator sufficiently knowledgeable to be reliable?
4. Is the narrator sufficiently moral to be reliable?
5. Is the narrator too emotional to be reliable?
6. Are the narrator's actions sufficiently inconsistent with his or her words to make you suspicious of his or her reliability?

Remind students how they determine meaning in cases where they encounter an unreliable narrator:

1. Determine that the narrator is unreliable.
2. Check the facts of the situation.
3. Apply your knowledge of the world.

Note that students will be applying these strategies to a variety of stories during the next week or so. Explain to students that they will encounter unreliable narrators, narrators who are reliable sometimes and unreliable other times, narrators whose reliability is arguable, and reliable narrators.

Read "That's What Happened to Me" by Michael Fessier aloud to the class. The story is narrated by Bottles Barton, a high school boy who thinks he is picked on because he has to work in a drugstore washing bottles rather than try out for any team. Bottles begins the story by saying, "I have done things and have had things happen to me and nobody knows about it. So I am writing about it so people will know. Although there are a lot of things I could tell about, I will just tell about the jumping because that gave me the biggest thrill. . . . I was the greatest jumper ever was." Bottles tells of how he won a track meet by setting a state record in the high jump—clearing the bar with a standing jump—and by winning the pole vault without using the pole. He tells of how great a hero he was and how he impressed a popular girl who had teased and ignored him.

In a large group discussion, ask the following questions:

1. How did the students at school treat Bottles? How did he feel about it? How do you know?
2. How would Bottles's feelings affect the story he chooses to tell us?
3. Look at the six questions we ask about narrators. Do any of the questions relate to Bottles?
4. Bottles tells us about his great achievements. Do you believe him? Give three facts from the story that support your view.
5. How does Bottles feel about himself? How do you know?
6. How do you feel about Bottles? Why?

In the discussion, students should note that Bottles is put down by everyone at school, which makes him both angry and ashamed. Consequently, he is unreliable when he talks about himself, both because of his self-interest and his emotional state. Students should note these and other facts to support their views: Bottles is small, so

he is not likely to be a good jumper; he has never played a sport; no one could make the jumps that Bottles claims he made. Students will probably differ in their responses to how Bottles feels about himself. Some will argue that he must be self-confident to say that he is able to do all the great things he claims he has done or will do. Others will point to his unreliability and argue that he must feel very bad about himself if he is reduced to writing such obvious lies. It is not important to have students come to a consensus on this issue. It is important, however, to have students recognize how the narrator's reliability is critical to their determinations. Students' feelings about Bottles will likely vary. Some may feel sorry for him. Others may blame him for his need for approval.

After the discussion, tell students to keep in mind the issues that they raised when they read "The Somebody" by Danny Santiago. "The Somebody" is narrated by Chato de Shamrock, the last member of the the Shamrock Street Gang, whose other members left the street when a railroad bought their families' homes. Chato does not get along well at home. He argues with his father after Chato announces his decision to quit school. He explains that he hates the babies in his house; in fact, he squeezes them "a little hard when nobody's looking." And "just to prove [he is] alive," Chato writes his name in public places. As he does this, he is always on the watch for the Sierra, a rival street gang, although Mr. Calderon, a counselor at the Boys' Club, says that the Sierra have forgotten that Chato is alive. Chato tells the story of a day when he had a vision, when he made his decision to quit school and to make his name in the world by writing his name all over the city. He says that his writing is so good that a man in a Cadillac who sees it would surely offer him a job, and that the young woman who sees it seems as though she has fallen in love with it. And Chato wants to do his writing alone, although he is tempted to go with a girl he calls Crusader Rabbit after he finds her drawing hearts around his name. He chooses not to, he says, "because I had my reputation to think of." The story ends with Chato's making a prediction: "L.A. is a big city man, but give me a couple of months and I'll be famous all over town."

Read "The Somebody" aloud. Divide students into heterogeneous groups of four or five to answer the following questions:

**Worksheet on "The Somebody"**

1. What happened to Chato's gang? To his street? How would that make him feel?

2. How does Chato feel about babies? What does this tell us about him?

3. Look at the six questions we ask about narrators. Do any of the questions relate to Chato?

4. Chato talks about how the Sierra, his fifth-grade teacher, the man in the Cadillac, and the 18-year-old girl feel about him. According to Chato, how do they feel about him? Is he right? How do you know? (You should give a separate answer for each of the four people.)

5. Chato is very lucky in the story. He says he talks back to both his father and Mr. Calderon and gets away with it. How do you explain Chato's luck?

6. Why didn't Chato go with the girl he calls Crusader Rabbit? Do you think he should have gone? Explain your answer.

7. How does Chato feel about himself? How do you know?

8. How do you feel about Chato? Why?

After the groups have completed their discussions, ask the following questions in a large group:

1. Is Chato a reliable narrator? Why or why not? Students should respond that Chato is unreliable. Probe for which criteria he does not meet and for evidence to support the claim that he does not meet those criteria. Students should note that Chato's self-interest and emotional state make him unreliable. They should also note the conflict between Chato's judgment and the judgments of the other characters in the story, characters who are less involved, less lonely, less insecure, and hence more reliable observers.
2. Explain some things that we understand that Chato fails to understand (or fails to admit he understands).

In this discussion, highlight how students determined the facts in the story and then applied their knowledge of the world to make inferences about those facts.

Before they read "I Got a Name" by Zachary Gold (see Appendix B), ask students to write about how they would feel about a younger brother or sister who always wanted to hang around with them. Have them also write about whether their feelings would ever change and what might cause the change. Their writing should help prepare students to understand the feelings of Frankie, the narrator of the story.

After students have written for ten to fifteen minutes, discuss their responses. Ask students if they would be reliable narrators of stories about their relationships with their younger siblings. Students should note that their self-interest and their lack of knowledge about their siblings' feelings would make them suspect as narrators. Have students read "I Got a Name" and answer the following worksheet questions independently:

**Worksheet on "I Got a Name"**

We've been examining the judgments of narrators. Let's look at some of the judgments Frankie makes. In each case ask yourself, Is Frankie's

judgment accurate? If I am suspicious of Frankie's judgment, how do I understand the situation? Make sure that you check the facts and that you apply your knowledge of the world.

1. On page 46 Frankie calls Itzie a nut because of the way Itzie "blows steam." Is Itzie a nut? Explain your answer by referring to Frankie's reliability, the facts of the story, and your knowledge of the world.

2. On page 51 Frankie says that "something" woke him. He can't explain it. Can you explain why Frankie woke up? Explain your answer by referring to Frankie's reliability, the facts of the story, and your knowledge of the world.

3. On page 51 Frankie complains that he always takes the rap for what happens. Does Frankie always take the rap? Explain your answer by referring to Frankie's reliability, the facts of the story, and your knowledge of the world.

4. On page 54 Frankie says that he said that the rock throwing was an accident "for Ma's sake." Did Frankie say this for his mother's sake? Explain your answer by referring to Frankie's reliability, the facts of the story, and your knowledge of the world.

5. At the very end of the story Frankie implies that it's impossible to figure Itzie out. Is it impossible to understand why Itzie asked Frankie not to call him Al? Explain your answer by referring to

Frankie's reliability, the facts of the story, and your knowledge of the world.

Discuss the students' responses. Students should be able to understand that all Itzie wanted was respect. They should also understand that Frankie is not being completely honest with himself. For example, some students should remark that it was Frankie's guilty feelings that caused him to wake up and also to explain away the rock-throwing incident. Reinforce the six criteria and the steps students used to make judgments that conflict with the narrator's judgment.

Remind students that the last three stories they have read all focus on people who feel left out. Ask them to discuss what ideas the authors have on this issue. Ask them which of the three characters they liked the best, and why. In the discussion, probe for the differences in the three characters' responses to their being outsiders.

Read aloud "Raymond's Run" by Toni Cade Bambera. In "Raymond's Run," Squeaky, the young girl who narrates the story, tells of the way she cares for Raymond, her hydrocephalic brother, and of her running, which is, as she says, "what I am all about." Squeaky tells of her rivalry with other girls, especially with Gretchen, of her disgust at the "nonsense" young girls have to go through, of her joy at seeing the running ability of her brother. Unlike the other narrators the students have encountered in the unit, Squeaky's perceptions are often insightful. Despite her youth and inexperience, the distance between Squeaky and the implied author often seems to be quite small. After the students have read the story ask: What are Squeaky's most important personality characteristics?

In the discussion, search for evidence from the story to support students' views. Make sure that students discuss personality traits and not physical traits (e.g., "She's little" or "She's fast"). Discuss whether these characteristics make her reliable. Students should note that on balance Squeaky is admirable. She works hard, she cares for her brother, and she is straightforward. Students should also note that her actions are consistent with her words. On the other hand, students should note that Squeaky's interest in her reputation may make her occasionally unreliable.

Divide the class into heterogeneous groups of four to five. Have them work on the following worksheet:

**Worksheet on "Raymond's Run"**

We have been examining the judgments of narrators. Let's look at some of the judgments Squeaky makes. In each case ask yourself: Is Squeaky's judgment accurate? If I am suspicious of Squeaky's judgment, how do I understand the situation? Make sure that you check the facts and that you apply your knowledge of the world.

1. Squeaky dismisses Gretchen as a challenger. Does Squeaky regard Gretchen as a threat to her winning? Explain your answer by referring to Squeaky's reliability, the facts of the story, and your knowledge of the world.

2. Squeaky says that "girls never really smile at each other." Is her assessment accurate? Explain your answer by referring to Squeaky's reliability, the facts of the story, and your knowledge of the world.

3. Later Squeaky says she walks down Broadway without a care in the world. Does she have no cares? Explain your answer by referring to Squeaky's reliability, the facts of the story, and your knowledge of the world.

4. Still later Squeaky says that her mother should be glad that Squeaky does not like the May Pole dancing. Is Squeaky's attitude about the May Pole dancing desirable? Explain your answer by referring to Squeaky's reliability, the facts of the story, and your knowledge of the world.

5. Before she hears who has won the race, Squeaky smiles. She says that she is thinking about Raymond. She says she would be smiling even if she lost. Would she? Explain your answer by referring to Squeaky's reliability, the facts of the story, and your knowledge of the world.

6. At the very end of the story Squeaky says that she and Gretchen share a real smile. Do they? Explain your answer by referring to Squeaky's reliability, the facts of the story, and your knowledge of the world.

After the group work, discuss the students' responses. Students should note that although we are suspicious of some of Squeaky's judgments, for example, that she is not worried about Gretchen, we do not suspect most of them. Students should note that Squeaky seems to have a genuine understanding of herself, a genuine love for her brother, and some sound insights into the world.

**Moving toward Independence**

Now that students have read and discussed several stories with the aid of questions, they should be ready to move on to independent interpretation, something they get little opportunity to do, according to Marshall (1989). It is essential that students have a chance to apply the strategies they have been taught. As Rosenblatt (1985) explains, "Emphasis on the essentiality of linguistic and literary conventions may lead to . . . fixation on abstracted patterns as against the realities of literary and linguistic activities and experiences" (43). Indeed, this unit would be a disastrous failure if the strategies were taught as ends in themselves. They must be taught as tools to help students understand and appreciate literature that features an unreliable narrator. The Five-Minute University version of this unit should not simply require students to recite the six questions and the three steps of reconstruction; it should also enable students to read and discuss literature without

the assistance of a teacher, a practice that is the reality of our literary experience.

*Principles Underlying the Instruction*

As in the previous lesson, the works here are sequenced from a story which features an easily identifiable unreliable narrator to stories in which the reliability of the narrator is problematic. In addition, this lesson also works to promote authentic discourse. Indeed, because students are asked to think and talk about potentially controversial issues in the stories without the aid of a teacher's questions, the instruction that follows should resemble conversation much more than recitation. Nystrand and Gamoran (in press) stress that the reciprocity that marks genuine dialogue is seldom found in classrooms. They find further that the substantive engagement of students resulting from reciprocity has a strong positive effect on achievement. Finally, this lesson ends by having students create their own narrator. The stories will demonstrate as clearly as an analytical essay students' understanding of the unit concepts, and sharing the stories will give students practice with many more texts.

The Instruction

Review with students several examples of when their understanding of a situation was different from the understanding of the narrator who presented that situation. Review the steps that students went through to come to their understanding. Note that students have also recognized that first-person narrators can be reliable.

Explain to students that they will now be evaluating the reliability of first-person narrators independently, beginning with Charlie Gordon, the narrator of "Flowers for Algernon" by Daniel Keyes. This story is told as a series of progress reports filed by Charlie, who is the subject of an experiment designed to raise his IQ of 68 to an IQ of more than 200. The experiment is a success, at least initially. Ultimately, however, Charlie watches Algernon, the laboratory mouse which receives the same treatment as Charlie, deteriorate and finally die, and realizes that he will experience the same fate. Through the course of the progress reports, Charlie's judgments and understandings change as he gains and then loses intelligence. Before the experiment, Charlie considers himself very popular at work, a judgment he changes after he gains intelligence and recognizes the cruelty that marked his fellow workers' dealings with him. Before the experiment, Charlie considers the scientists and the teacher who work with him to be geniuses. After the

experiment, he becomes annoyed that one of the scientists could read only three ancient languages and was unacquainted with Hindustani and Chinese.

Begin reading the story aloud in class and then let students read on their own. Before they begin reading, explain to students that they will be discussing Charlie's judgments about his job and the people at work, his teacher and the people at the laboratory, and himself.

After students have completed their reading, divide the class into six heterogeneous groups. Assign two groups to investigate the judgments that Charlie makes in each of these areas. Explain that each group should identify important judgments that Charlie makes and explain whether they agree or disagree with those judgments. The students should explain their analyses with reference to Charlie's reliability, the facts of the story, and their own knowledge of the world.

While the students are working, circulate through the classroom to check on their progress. Students working on Charlie's judgments about the people at work should discuss the progress reports from March 23; April 3, 15, and 25; and July 27 and 28. Students should note that Charlie's "friends" were obviously not friendly to him. Whether these people have had a change of heart by the last entries is problematic. Encourage students to discuss whether the facts of the story support Charlie's final judgment about the people at work.

Students working on Charlie's judgments about the people at the laboratory should focus on what Charlie says about Miss Killian, Dr. Strauss, and Dr. Nemur. The students should easily recognize that his initial assessments of Miss Killian's "genius" are unreliable; they should also discuss whether Charlie was justified in sending her away. Prompt the students to consider whether Charlie's criticism of Strauss and Nemur is justified. Students should recognize that Charlie's low IQ made him an unreliable narrator initially, but they should consider whether his tremendous intelligence also may make him unreliable.

Students who consider Charlie's judgments about himself should discuss his shame (April 20 and May 20), his attempts to communicate with Miss Killian (May 18), and his assessments of what will happen to him. Urge students to consider whether that shame is justified. These students should also note that Charlie's increase in intelligence is not an absolute guarantee of his reliability.

When the groups have finished, ask them to report on their findings. Use the group reports as a springboard for a discussion of the importance of intelligence. Students should discuss what Keyes's view might be and how they feel about it.

Tell students that for homework they are to consider another diary. Distribute "The Journal of a Wife Beater" by Harry Mark Petrakis (see Appendix C), a story which is told as a series of journal entries by Vasili about his relationship with his new wife Nitsa.

Explain to students that their discussion of narrators establishes that different people interpret the same event in different ways. Note that Vasili and his wife Nitsa obviously have different views of their lives together. Tell students to step into Nitsa's shoes and to write a diary from her point of view for October 3, 7, 11, and 23. Remind students that they need to determine what sort of person Nitsa is, what the facts are, and, finally, how a person like Nitsa would view those facts. As students write, circulate to make sure that they are adopting Nitsa's persona. When they have finished, have students read the entries that they wrote. Ask students to support their renditions of Nitsa's story by referring to Vasili's reliability, the facts of the situation, and Nitsa's reliability. After students have read several examples of each entry, ask whether they believe the beatings will stop. Discuss whether students believe Vasili's explanation for why they will stop. At least some students should recognize that Vasili's fear of Nitsa—not his respect for her—may have influenced his pronouncement. Review the steps that students have taken to come to their conclusions.

Begin the next class by reviewing with students several examples of when their understanding of a situation was different from the understanding of the narrator. Review the criteria students have applied to assess a narrator's reliability. Finally, review what steps students must go through once they have determined that a narrator is unreliable. Tell students that they will have to apply their knowledge as they discuss the next story. Read "A & P" by John Updike. "A & P" is narrated by Sammy, a nineteen-year-old checkout boy. Sammy tells the story of how three girls "in nothing but bathing suits" walk into the grocery. Lengel, the manager, spots the girls as Sammy is checking their groceries. He tells the girls that in the future they should be "decently" dressed. After a brief exchange between Lengel and the girls, Sammy says, "I quit," quickly, as he explains, "quick enough for them to hear, hoping they'll stop and watch me, their unsuspected hero." But the girls do not stop. Instead, Lengel gives Sammy a chance to reconsider, but as Sammy explains, "It seems to me that once you begin a gesture it's fatal not to go through with it." Sammy leaves the store, and as he looks back at Lengel, who had taken Sammy's place at the register, he says he feels "how hard the world was going to be to [him] hereafter."

After completing the reading, ask students whether Sammy's decision to quit was justified. Have students write down their responses on scratch paper. Divide the class into groups based on their votes. Tell students that they have fifteen minutes to prepare their case to try to convince the other side to see their point of view. Note that students should consider Sammy's reliability and the facts of the situation when they make their case. Be prepared to take a side if students do not split somewhat evenly. Circulate to make certain students are compiling evidence. Prompt the students only if they need help. They should examine Sammy's attitude toward his job, the girls' behavior, and Lengel's words with the girls. After fifteen minutes, lead an informal debate on the issue. It is not important that students come to a consensus on the issue. When students are no longer presenting new evidence and analysis, end the debate. Note students' examples of how they assessed Sammy's reliability, how they determined the facts of the situation, and how they applied their knowledge of the world. Inform students that they will be having a similar debate during their next class.

Read "My Sister's Marriage" by Cynthia Marshall Rich. The story is narrated by Sarah, the younger of two daughters of a successful and educated small-town doctor. Sarah explains that when her mother died "she left just Olive and me to take care of Father." Sarah explains that she and Olive had a happy childhood. Their father was a "gentleman" who raised his daughters to be "ladies." They enjoyed taking care of their father: "Even today Olive couldn't deny that we had a happy childhood. She used to be very proud of being the lady of the house, of sitting across the candlelight from my father like a little wife."

Sarah was glad when Olive began to take walks with young men in the evening, for it gave her a chance to assume Olive's role in her father's life. Sarah explains that Olive, who worked in the post office, began to dream of adventure when she saw foreign stamps or even postmarks from great cities. Olive began to read but resisted talking about her reading with her father, saying, "Why does he have to pry . . . ?"

Sarah goes on to tell how Olive meets a traveling salesman and begins to see him without telling her father, and how Sarah participated in the deceit. After several weeks, Olive tells her father about the man and asks her father to meet him. But, her father refuses, saying, "I have seen too many of his kind to take any interest in seeing another." Olive implores him and explains that she thinks she is in love. Her father refuses and tells her not to see the man again, saying, as he

leaves for work, "I know you will understand that this is best." Sarah tells how that night they received a phone call from Olive, who said that she was married and that she and her husband would come home that very evening if her father would receive them. He refuses. Sarah recalls that her father turned to her to ask whether she would have done this to him. She writes: " 'No,' I said, and I was almost joyful, knowing it was true."

In the year that passed between Olive's marriage and the telling of the story, Sarah and her father did not speak of Olive. Olive sent Sarah long letters asking whether their father would read one if she wrote him. Sarah tells how she wrote back saying that she would ask, but explains that she didn't, for her father "wasn't well . . . and I know he didn't want to hear her name." One day Sarah's father finds her writing to Olive, and he tells her not to ally herself "with deception." He takes the letters and says to the crying Sarah, "We'll keep each other company, Sarah Ann, just the two of us." Sarah thinks, "I knew then that was the way it should be." Later, Sarah finds the letters "by chance" in the back of her father's desk drawer, under a pile of old medical reports. She burns them. Sarah then closes the story with this explanation: "But sometimes I think this is the way it was meant to be. First Mother died and left just the two of us to take care of Father. And yesterday when I burned Olive's letters I thought, 'Now there is only me.' "

After completing the reading, note that the story is developed around the conflicts that occur among the three main characters. Ask students to respond to the following three questions:

1. Was Olive right in running away to get married?
2. Was the father right in opposing the marriage?
3. Was Sarah Ann right in burning Olive's letters?

Have them write their responses on scratch paper. Lead a debate on each question in the same fashion as the debate on "A & P." Students should examine the circumstances of the family and the relationship of the father to the girls. If any of the questions does not produce much dispute, concentrate on eliciting evidence for the students' opinions.

When the debates are over, ask students to consider what generalizations Updike and Rich would make about what motivates people to behave the way they do. Lead a large group discussion on this question.

Conclude the class by highlighting examples of how they assessed Sarah's reliability, how they determined the facts of the situation, and how they applied their knowledge of the world.

Explain to students that by now they should be experts at evaluating the reliability of narrators and at making meanings when narrators are unreliable. Explain to students that their skills should help them understand all types of literature, even stories that are not told in the first person. Note that in every story they read, they should evaluate the reliability of the characters, sift through judgments to get to the facts, and apply their knowledge of the world to those facts.

Tell students that, as a final activity, they will be writing a story told by a first-person narrator. Explain that they should reveal whether the narrator is reliable by including details that help the reader answer the six questions that they have been posing:

1. Does the narrator's self-interest make you suspicious of his or her reliability?
2. Is the narrator sufficiently experienced to be reliable?
3. Is the narrator sufficiently knowledgeable to be reliable?
4. Is the narrator sufficiently moral to be reliable?
5. Is the narrator too emotional to be reliable?
6. Are the narrator's actions sufficiently inconsistent with his or her words to make you suspicious of his or her reliability?

Give students an opportunity to work in class. Circulate and give them help as needed.

When students have finished their stories, have them read their stories to the class. After each story, discuss whether the narrator is reliable. If the narrator is unreliable, discuss specific cases in which the reader's understanding is different from the speaker's understanding.

After completing this activity, remind students again to evaluate the reliability of characters whenever they read, especially when the characters tell a story. Discuss any questions that remain.

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# Appendix B

## "I Got a Name"

### by Zachary Gold

My brother, Itzie, is a midget. Maybe not a midget exactly, but he's so small it counts for the same thing. Every time anybody looks at him, he throws his shoulders back and his chest out like he's going to blow up right through his skin. Even that doesn't help any.

But is that my fault? Did I make him that way?

Try to tell Itzie that.

He won't even listen. I never saw a kid who has less use for ears. You'd think he'd listen some of the time. But no, not Itzie. Itzie always has to be right; Itzie always has to be talking. He's a regular Lippy Leo. Then he calls me a sorehead if I tell him to shut up; he thinks I'm picking on him. I should pick on midgets!

The kid says it's my fault everybody calls him Itzie. I did it; I always ride him he says. I'm the guy that made him small. Like I tried to tell Ma, it was Henny Prokesch who first called him Itzie. Henny said he was just an itsie-bitsie guy. Is that my fault? Can I go around telling people what to say?

God forbid I should happen to call him Itzie in the house. He begins screaming like the ceiling fell down on him. He begins calling me names I wouldn't take from anybody.

So does Ma tell him to keep his mouth shut? No. Ma tells me to call him Alfred. The whole world calls him Itzie; I should call him Alfred. Nobody even knows his name is Alfred.

"Does he call you anything but Frankie?" Ma says.

"You heard him," I say. "You heard what he called me."

"Don't change the subject," Ma says. "Your name is Frank and his is Alfred. You remember that."

So I began to call him Alfie in the house, and was that good enough? It had to be Alfred. I had to be careful, yet, how I said it. I had to be careful. I had to say it just right. Some kid.

He's half cracked, that's what he is. The kid's a little nuts. I never saw anybody, day in, day out, get out of bed on the wrong side like Itzie.

Every time you look at him, he's mad. Say something about the way he plays ball and bang!—he's sore. Say something about his brain

or his size, and right away he's blowing steam like an engine. The whole world has brothers, but I have to get a nut like Itzie.

In the winter it isn't so bad because there's school then, but in the summer he's always hanging around.

"Why don't you leave him home?" the fellows say to me. "Why don't you tell him to go away?"

I should try to tell Itzie anything! For that matter, anybody should try. It gets you a swift nothing.

During the summer punchball is the big game. You can play punchball any place on the street. You play one sewer for home and the next sewer down the block for second; then halfway in between, on each side of the gutter, you lay out first and third, and you got a field. Then all you have to do is punch the ball out and play like baseball.

We got enough kids on the block for a couple of teams. This summer they picked me for captain of one of the teams, and when it came to choosing sides, it was me against Henny Prokesch.

So we chose and I got first pick. Naturally, because this wasn't something just for me, I tried to get the best guys. I mean it wasn't something where a fellow could play favorites. The first thing I had to look out for was that I get me a good team. I even picked Joey Lune, and I hate Joey. But he's the classiest firstbaseman on the block, and he hits a mean ball. So I wasn't just trying to keep Itzie out; I wanted him to get a game, but I had to pick the best guys first, didn't I?

It ended up with me having six guys and Henny having six guys and Itzie standing there on the curb waiting to be picked.

"Don't I get a game?" Itzie said. "What's the matter—am I an orphan?"

"I got my team," Henny said.

"That's fair! You radishes; you red and yellow radishes!"

"What are you getting sore about?" I said. "Take it easy."

"Sure. Sure. Take it easy. Every chump on the block gets a game, but I'm left out."

"You can warm up with the guys," Henny said. "You can do that, Itzie."

"I got a name," the kid said. "You call me Al."

He was getting sore. In another minute he would have been swinging at somebody.

"Listen," I said, "you'll play."

"Yeah?" Itzie said. "How? You show me how."

"Look. It's summer now and some of the kids'll be going away to the country a while, and some days they'll be going to the beach. Or maybe they'll get sick. You know how it is. There'll always be room for you. You'll always get a game."

"How about today?"

"Well, maybe not today," I said.

"That's some system," Itzie said. "I got to pray somebody breaks a leg."

But he knew what I meant, and I saw him cooling off, so I knew it was all right. You got to think fast with that kid around.

And sure enough, that's how it was. Itzie played nearly every game. In fact, he went out and bought a special high-bouncer ball for us to use. He used to bring the ball with him every time we played. We always used Itzie's ball.

One day one of my guys didn't show up, and Itzie played on my side. It was one tight game, believe me. Before we could say go, the other guys had plunked in three runs, and when we got up, we just couldn't do anything.

We held them all right after that, but we couldn't do a thing in our half of the inning. We were popping up flies to the outfield, and all our grounders were going smack into the hands of the infielders. We just couldn't do anything.

Then in the last inning Joey Lune got up and clouted a triple off McGrady's stoop, way down the block. It would have been a home run, only the outfielder made a lucky heave, and Joey had to hold it up at third.

We sacrificed him in, but that left us with two runs to tie and three to win. Then, all of a sudden, we began to hit. For the next four guys, three of them got on base, and one popped out. So it was two out and the winning run on first and Itzie up. My heart nearly dropped out because, between you and me, Itzie's not exactly a hitter. He can place a ball all right, but he has no power.

Itzie took his time and smacked a grounder down between second and third, and right away I saw it was good. Then, like it always happens, there was a break in the game and Henny himself made a wild throw to the plate, and three runs scored because the ball got lost in the hedges around the Elliot lawn.

Itzie got a clean single, all right, but the three runs were breaks. We deserved one, but not three. But that's how it goes, and I was so happy I nearly kissed the kid.

"Itzie," I said, "you're a wonder. That was some smack."

"Thanks," he said.

"You were right there in the clutch."

"I smacked it and prayed."

"It takes more than praying, and you got it," I said.

He was right in there with us, the kid was. And talking his head off. But it was all right. Sometimes you don't mind; it's all in how things are. Sometimes it sounds fresh and sometimes it doesn't. With that game under my belt, it sounded like music.

It was hot sitting on the stoop, and my mouth felt sticky and dry. I saw Henny giving me the wink and pointing to the corner. We could go around the block and get a soda or something. Henny could live on that stuff; I never saw a guy drink soda like Henny.

"It was lucky," Itzie was saying. "I just happened to see the hole and put it there. That's all. It was lucky."

I got up and walked over to Henny.

"How about a soda?" Henny said.

"O.K."

"We could stop in at Mahoney's and stick around a while. It's early yet."

"Sure," I said.

Mahoney's was a pool parlor next to the candy store. He wouldn't let us play, but he let us stand around and watch. He always got the baseball scores first, too.

"Where you going, Frankie?" the kid said when he saw me walking away.

"Just around," I said.

He got up.

"Where you think you're going?" I said.

"With you."

That's it all the time. You're nice to the kid, and right away he thinks he's your shadow. Sure, I should let him come along and take him with me to Mahoney's. Next thing I'd know he'd go blah-blah-blah to Mom about Mahoney's. That kid just doesn't know when he's had enough.

"Not with me, you ain't going," I said.

You should have seen him. Like I kicked him or something. Everything I do, I got to worry about him.

"What do you mean, I ain't going?" he said. "Everybody's going."

"Not you," I said.

Right away he got mad. Right away King Itzie was in a temper. "The sidewalk's free. You ain't got a lease on the sidewalk. I can go where I want, can't I?"

"Not with me," I said.

"I'm going."

"Go on home, peewee."

For a minute I thought he was going to fight or argue some more. But he just stood there looking like I took his last nickel. "You're some brother," he said. "You're some lousy brother."

Then he turned and ran the other way down the block.

I had a plain chocolate at the candy store, and we stayed a while kidding around. Then when we figured it would be around the sixth inning, we went over to Mahoney's.

We stuck around Mahoney's, watching the boys shoot pool. The things some of those guys can do! It's like a free education down at Mahoney's.

The Dodgers scored in the seventh, but it didn't help any. In the other half of the inning, the other guys scored twice. I get good and sick and tired of those Dodgers sometimes.

I could see the game was as good as over, so I gave Henny the high sign and we got out.

I trotted down the block and all the way home. I was puffing when I got to the door. I got upstairs and headed for the bathroom to wash up. I knew Ma would be sore because I was so late. I thought if I could get into the bathroom, maybe Ma would cool off by the time I got out. But Ma heard me, and she came walking out of the bedroom. "Is Alfred with you?" she said.

"With me? He ain't been with me since this afternoon."

"Hasn't," Ma said.

"Anyway, I don't know where he is."

"Didn't he play with you this afternoon?"

"Sure. Sure," I said.

"Where did you go after the game?"

"Oh, just around."

"And what about Alfred?"

"How should I know, Ma? Tell me, how should I know?"

Ma was worried. "Where could he be?" she said.

"I don't know," I said. "I can go out and look. Maybe he's just hanging around somewheres."

"All right," Pa said. "Go out and look. But come back in a half hour. Don't stay out any longer. Do you understand?"

"Sure," I said. "Half hour."

I climbed into a sweater and went out. Ma looked awfully worried.

I walked up and down the block twice. He wasn't anywheres around. I even looked in the alleys. Who knows where a crazy kid like that could be? I tried near the schoolyard around the corner.

Sometimes a gang of kids hangs out near the school at night. Why anyone should want to go near the place in vacation, I don't know; but they do anyway. Itzie wasn't there.

There was no place else to look, so I started home again. I came into our block and right there ahead of me I could see the kid walking. He must have come down from the parkway. He hadn't passed me, and there was no other place he could have come from.

I trotted and caught up with him.

"Where you been?" I said.

He didn't answer me; he just kept walking.

"You dopey nut," I said. "Ma's worried sick. Where you been?"

Go talk to a wall. I could have socked him. He didn't say anything, not a word. He wouldn't even look at me. Worrying Ma like that and then marching up like he was King Kong or something. He deserved a sock. He deserved a good slamming.

"Well?" I said. "You talking? Or do I have to give you a smack?"

He began to run. I chased after him. He got to the house before I did and slammed the door in my face. By the time I got upstairs, he was in the bedroom. Pa was sitting at the kitchen table, and Ma was inside with Itzie.

"Where were you?" I heard Ma say.

"Just out."

"What happened?"

"Nothing."

"Something happened," Ma said. "What?"

"Nothing."

"Tell me. I promise I won't be angry."

"Do you want me to tell your father to come in? Would you like that?"

"I don't care. I don't care. I don't care."

Then I heard something, like he was crying. That kid. What happened to him?

Ma came out and sat down at the table. "Let's eat," she said. Pa was looking at her, but she didn't say a word more.

That was some meal. We sat there like a bunch of dummies, nobody saying anything, just on account of a snotty kid.

After supper I did some reading and then sat around listening to the radio. Itzie didn't come out once. He didn't even come out for something to eat. He just stayed in the bedroom. At eleven o'clock I called it a night and went in to undress.

Itzie was already in bed. He looked like he was asleep, but he wasn't. I could tell.

"Itzie," I said. "Itzie."

He wouldn't answer.

I got undressed and climbed into bed. I tried again.

"Hey, Al—"

I should bat my head against a stone wall. I went to sleep.

I don't know what woke me. I can sleep even if a bunch of elephants comes stamping into the room. But that night something woke me up, and I opened my eyes, and I saw Pa sitting on Itzie's bed, talking to him.

I didn't let on I was awake. I didn't say anything. I kept my eyes closed, but I could hear them talking.

"Nothing," Itzie said.

"What happened after the game?" Pa said.

"We just sat around. That's all."

"Did you do something wrong? Did you make an error?"

"No. Gee, I was good. I was real good."

"What happened, then?"

"Nothing. Honest."

"Did Frankie say something to you?"

"Frankie didn't do anything."

"Where did Frankie go after the game?"

"He went away somewheres with Henny. I don't know."

"Didn't you go along?"

"No."

"What about the rest of the fellows?"

"They all went."

"Why didn't you go?"

"I don't know. I just felt like sitting around."

"Did Frankie tell you not to go?"

Itzie didn't say anything.

"Is that what happened?" Pa said. "Did Frankie say something to you?"

He wouldn't answer. He didn't say a word.

"I'll talk to Frankie tomorrow," Pa said.

I just laid there thinking. I get blamed for everything. It was my fault. Pa thought I was to blame. That Itzie! Of all the people in the world, I get a kid like Itzie for a brother. He was poison, that's what he was. Every time anything happened, I got blamed. If it was going to be that way, let him keep away from me; let him stop hanging around. I'd show him, all right; he'd see.

In the morning I waited until Pa was gone before I got out of bed. Then I dressed and ate breakfast and got out into the street. All the

guys were there waiting for the punchball game. Itzie was over by the house, banging the high-bouncer against the stoop.

Like the other day, one of my guys was missing. We got up in two teams, and I saw Itzie coming over. He stood near the outside of the circle.

"All right," I said good and loud, "we'll play you one man short."

"What about me?" Itzie said. "Don't I get a game?"

That's what I was waiting for. "What about you?" I said. "You're no regular."

"It's all right with the other guys," Itzie said. "They say it's O.K."

"Go on home," I said. "Go away."

"I'm playing," Itzie said.

"I said no."

"Don't tell me what to do."

"I'm telling you you're not playing."

"You can't stop me. You're one man short and I'm playing. You said so yourself."

Sure, I said so once. So any time anything happens, I get blamed. I should always take the rap for him. Not me. Let him take care of himself for a change.

"We don't need anybody else," I said. "Throw the ball over here and keep score if you want to do something."

"Yeah?" he said. "Yeah?"

"Yeah," I said. "Throw the ball over."

"Either I play or no ball," Itzie said.

"Listen to him. Listen to the shrimp. Should I come over and take it away?"

"You got to catch me first, big flat feet."

"Throw it over before I get sore."

"I play."

"I told you no."

"No ball then."

"Throw it over."

"Yah! Come and get it."

Itzie was dancing in the street, hopping up and down. I stepped in to him. He danced back. I grabbed, but he was like oil. He was off in a second and I chased him.

He ran around cars and dodged up alleys and across lawns. I nearly got him a couple of times, but he was too shifty and quick. I couldn't get close enough to him.

Then he ran up to the stoop of our house and stood on the top step with his back against the door. "Balloon belly, come and catch me!"

I was standing in the middle of the gutter, good and sore. The little wise guy!

"I'll go and get another ball," Henny said.

"We'll play with that one," I said.

Then I told the fellows to surround the stoop and, when I gave the word, to close in. I was through playing games with him.

I started toward the steps. Itzie had a rock in his hand. He hefted it and yelled: "I'll bean the first guy that comes near me!"

You should have seen his face. It was like a sheet.

"Throw the ball over," I said.

"I swear I'll bean you!" Itzie yelled.

"Give me that ball."

I kept walking in, and when I got to the steps, Itzie pulled his arm back, and I saw the rock coming at me. I tried to duck, but it was too late. I felt like my head was split open. I was down on the sidewalk holding my face. There was blood all over my hands. Itzie was standing on the steps; he looked scared. Suddenly he threw the ball at me. It bounced in the gutter and rolled away.

I tried to get up, but I couldn't. I heard Henny yell once, and then I didn't hear anything at all.

The doctor took three stitches in my face, and I thought my cheek was going to fall off. Ma kept me in bed, but I felt all right.

When Pa came home, Itzie got it hot and heavy. That kid sure had it coming to him.

But when I was in bed, I got to thinking. Can you imagine the shrimp doing that to me—heaving a rock? It's like that with the kids on the block. Sometimes you'll stick your chest right up against somebody and say, "Go ahead, do something!" and he'll say, "Go ahead, you do something, I dare you!"

And you'll stand there and talk, but it takes an awful lot before you'll start swinging. It takes a lot of nerve to heave a rock; a fellow has to feel pretty bad before he'll do anything like that.

Even Ma was down on Itzie. She brought him into the room. "Tell Frank you're sorry," she said.

"Aw, Ma—" I said.

"Go ahead," she said to Itzie.

The kid stood there a minute. "I didn't mean to hurt him," he said. "But I'm not sorry. He asked for it, that's what he did. He's some brother."

Can you imagine that? Right after Pa got through with him too. You have to beat that kid's brains out before he learns anything. Some guy.

"Alfred—" Ma said.

"I won't. I won't."

"All right," Ma said. "No more ball playing for you. You stay in the house every day for a week. You learn how to behave before you go out to play again. Throwing rocks! And at your own brother."

The kid didn't say a word.

In the morning Ma made pancakes for breakfast, and she kept piling them on my plate until I thought I'd bust. The kid didn't even seem hungry.

It was a real swell day; not too hot, not too cold. Ma didn't say, but I could see she was waiting for Itzie to say something. But no, not Itzie; that kid hasn't got any sense. He gets me sore.

So, for Ma's sake, because I could see she was feeling pretty bad, I said: "It was an accident, Mom. He didn't mean it. You let him go out, and if he does anything wrong, I'll ship him right back upstairs."

Ma looked at Itzie and she looked at me, and finally she said, "Well—but remember, Alfred, whatever Frank says goes."

We went downstairs together, and you'd think he'd say thanks or something to me. Not that kid. I'm not asking any favors, but he could do a little thing like that.

The whole gang was outside on the stoop. I could see the way they were looking at Itzie. They were a little scared of him. All of a sudden, he was different. Some of them didn't even see the bandage on my cheek.

"Hiya, Frankie," Henny said. "How's the face?"

"Just a couple of stitches," I said. "Nothing."

"Hiya, Itzie," Henny said.

Go ask me why I did it. When bigger dopes are born, they won't have anything on me.

"He's got a name," I said to Henny. "Call him Al."

Here I've been calling him Itzie as long as I can remember; out of nowhere I become a big-hearted Joe.

"Hey, Al," I called, "come on, walk me down, and we'll take a look at yesterday's scores in Mahoney's."

That was me talking. When I go crazy, I go the whole hog, all right.

You should have seen the kid.

About halfway down the block, I said, "What do you think of the Dodgers for next year, Al?"

"Look, Frankie," the kid said. "Call me Itzie, will you?".

Go figure it out.

# Appendix C

## "The Journal of a Wife Beater"

### by Harry Mark Petrakis

*October 2:* Today I beat my wife, Nitsa, for the first time! I preserve this momentous event for future generations by beginning this Journal and recording this first entry with some pride.

I did not beat her hard, really not hard at all. I gave her several clouts across her head with my open palm, enough to make her stagger and daze her a little. Then I led her courteously to a chair to show her I was not punishing her in anger.

"Why?" she asked, and there were small tears glistening in the corners of her eyes.

"Nothing of great significance," I said amiably. "The coffee you served me was not hot enough this morning and after the last few washings my shirts have not had enough starch. Yesterday and the day before you were late in arriving in the restaurant. All of these are small imprudences that display a growing laxity on your part. I felt it was time to suggest improvement."

She watched me with her lips trembling. How artfully women suffer!

"You have never struck me before," she said thoughtfully. "In the year since we married, Vasili, you have never struck me before."

"One does not wish to begin correction too soon," I said. "It would be unjust to expect a new bride to attain perfection overnight. A period of flexibility is required."

Her big black eyes brooded, but she said nothing.

"You understand," I said consolingly. "This does not mean I do not love you." I shook my head firmly to emphasize my words. "It is exactly because I do care for you that I desire to improve you. On a number of occasions in my father's house I can remember him beating my mother. Not hard you understand. A clout across the head, and a box upon the ear. Once when she left the barn door open and the cows strayed out, he kicked her, but that was an exception. My mother was a happy and contented woman all her life."

The conversation ended there, but Nitsa was silent and meditative as we prepared for bed. She did not speak again until we were under the covers in the darkness.

"Vasili," she asked quietly, "will you strike me again?"

"Only when I feel you need it," I said. "It should not be required too often. You are a sensible girl and I am sure are most anxious to please me by being a good wife and a competent homemaker."

She turned away on her pillow and did not say another word.

*October 3:* I slept splendidly last night!

*October 5:* Since I have a few moments of leisure this evening, I will fill in certain background information about Nitsa and myself so that future generations may better understand this record of an ideal marriage relationship.

First I must record my immense satisfaction in the results of the beating. Nitsa has improved tremendously the past two days. She has taken the whole affair as sensibly as any man could have wished.

Her good sense was what first impressed me about Nitsa. I met her about a year ago at a dance in the church hall, sponsored by the Daughters of Athens. I drank a little beer and danced once with each of a number of young ladies whose zealous mothers beamed at me from chairs along the wall. I might add here that before my marriage a year ago I was a very desirable catch for some fortunate girl. I was just a year past forty, an inch above average height, with all of my own hair and most of my own teeth, a number of which have been capped with gold. I had, and of course still have, a prosperous restaurant on Dart Street and a substantial sum in United States Savings Bonds. Finally, I myself was interested in marriage to a well-bred young lady. My first inclination was to return to Greece and select some daughter born to respect the traditions of the family; but as our parish priest, Father Antoniou, pointed out with his usual keen discernment, this would have been grossly unfair to the countless girls in our community who hoped for me as a bridegroom. Although marriage to any one of them would dismay the others, it would be better than if I scorned them all for a wife from overseas.

Nitsa impressed me because she was not as young as most of the other girls, perhaps in her late twenties, a tall athletic-looking girl who appeared capable of bearing my sturdy sons. She was not as beautiful a girl as I felt I deserved, but she made a neat and pleasant appearance. Most attractive young girls are too flighty and arrogant. They are not sensible enough to be grateful when a successful man pays them attention. Bringing one of them into a man's home is much the same as bringing in a puppy that has not yet been housebroken. Too much time is spent on fundamentals!

Imagine my delight when, in inquiry regarding Nitsa's family that night, I learned that she was the niece of our revered priest, Father Antoniou, visiting him from Cleveland.

I danced several American dances with her to demonstrate that I was not old-fashioned and spoke to her at some length of my assets and my prospects. She listened with unconcealed interest. We sat and drank coffeé afterward until a group of my friends called to me to lead one of the old country dances. Conscious of her watching me, I danced with even more than my usual grace and flourish, and leaped higher off the floor than I had in some time.

A day or two later I spoke seriously to Father Antoniou. He was frankly delighted. He phoned his sister, Nitsa's mother in Cleveland, and in no time at all the arrangements were made. As I had accurately surmised, the whole family, including Nitsa, were more than willing.

Several weeks later we were married. It was a festive affair and the reception cost a little over a thousand dollars which I insisted her father pay. He was a housepainter who worked irregularly, but in view of the fact that Nitsa brought me no dowry I felt he should demonstrate the good faith of the family by paying for the reception.

Nitsa and I spent a honeymoon weekend at the Mortimer Hotel so I could return to count the cash when the restaurant closed each evening. As it was, God only knows what the waitresses stole from me those two days. During our absence I had the bedroom of my apartment painted, and after considerable deliberation bought a new stove. I write this as proof of my thoughtfulness. The stove I had was only twelve years old, but I am worldly enough to understand how all women love new stoves. If permitted by weak and easily swayed husbands they would trade them in on newer models every year.

In recalling our first year together, while it was not quite what I expected, I was not completely disillusioned. There was a certain boldness and immodesty about Nitsa which I found displeasing, but one must bear with this in a healthy young woman.

As time went on she spent a good part of the day with me in the restaurant taking cash. She became familiar enough with my business so that when the wholesale produce and meat salesman called she could be trusted to order some of the staple items. But I noticed a certain laxity developing, a carelessness in her approach to her responsibilities, and remembering my father's success with my mother, it was then I beat her for the first time.

I am pleased that it seems to have prompted unreserved improvement. Bravo, Vasili!

*October 7:* It is after midnight and I am alone in the restaurant which is closed until morning. I am sitting at the small table in the kitchen and can hardly bear to write the shameful and disgraceful episode which follows.

Last night after returning from the restaurant I went to bed because I was tired. Nitsa came into the room as I was slipping under the covers. I had noticed a rather somber quietness about her all that day, but I attributed it to that time of the female month. When she had donned her night clothes and gotten into bed beside me, I raised my cheek for her to kiss me goodnight. She turned her back on me and for a moment I was peeved, but remembering her indisposition, I turned off the lamp and said nothing.

I fell asleep shortly and had a stirring dream. I fought beside Achilles on the plains before Troy. I carried a mighty shield and a long sword. Suddenly a massive Trojan appeared before me and we engaged each other in combat. After I brilliantly parried a number of his blows he seemed to recognize he was doomed. He retreated and I pressed him hard. While we slashed back and forth, another Trojan rose beside me as if he had sprung from the earth, and swung his weapon at my head. I raised my shield swiftly but not quite in time and the flat of his sword landed across my head. The pain was so terrible I shrieked out loud, and suddenly the plains of Troy and the helmeted warriors were all swept away and my eyes exploded open to the sight of Nitsa bent over me, calmly preparing to strike again!

I bellowed and clawed to sit up, and tried desperately to flee from the bed. The stick she swung bounced again across my head and the pain was ferocious. I fell off the bed in a tangle of sheets at her feet; then I jumped up frantically and ran to the other side of the bed, looking back in desperation to see if she followed. She stood dreadfully calm with the stick still in her hand.

"Are you mad!" I shouted. My nose seemed to be swelling and my head stung and I tasted blood from my cut lip. "You must be mad or in the employ of the devil! You have split me open!"

"I owed you one," she said quietly.

I looked at her in astonishment and rubbed my aching head. I could not comprehend the desecration of a wife striking her husband. "Your senses have come apart," I bellowed. "You might have broken my head!"

"I don't think so," she said. "You have an unusually dense head."

I was horrified. On top of my injuries her insolence could not be tolerated. I ran around the bed and pulled the stick from her hands. I swung it up and down. When it landed across her shoulders she

winced and gave a shrill squeal. Then I went to bathe my swollen head. A harrowing and terrible experience indeed!

*October 11:* Plague and damnation! Blood and unspeakable horror! She has done it again.

That wench of evil design waited just long enough for the swelling of my nose to recede and my lip to heal. All week she had been quiet and reserved. She came to work promptly and performed her duties efficiently. While I could never forget that night in bed when she struck me, I was willing to forgive. Women are by nature as emotionally unstable as dogs under the mad light of a full moon. But I am a generous man and in this foul manner was my generosity rewarded.

It happened shortly after the rush at lunch was over. The restaurant was deserted except for Nitsa at the register and the waitresses chattering beside the urns of coffee. I was sitting at the small table in the kitchen, smoking a cigar, and pondering whether to order short ribs or pork loins for lunch on Thursday. Suddenly I was conscious of an uneasy chill in the center of my back. A strange quick dread possessed me and I turned swiftly around and Nitsa was there. Almost at the same instant the pot she was swinging landed with a horrible clatter on my head. I let out a roar of outrage and pain, and jumped up holding my thundering head. I found it impossible to focus my eyes, and for a frenzied moment I imagined I was surrounded by a dozen Nitsas. I roared again in fear and anger, and ran to seek sanctuary behind the big stove. She made no move to follow me but stood quietly by the table with the pot in her hand.

"You must be mad!" I shrieked. "I will call the doctor and have him exchange your bloody head!"

The dishwasher, who had come from the back room where he had been eating, watched us with his great idiot eyes, and the waitresses, cousins of imbeciles, peered through the porthole of the swinging door.

"I owed you one," Nitsa said quietly. She put down the pot and walked from the kitchen past the awed and silent waitresses.

As I write this now, words are inadequate to describe my distress. Fiercer by far than the abominable lump on my head is the vision of chaos and disorder. In the name of all that is sacred, where is the moral and ordered world of my father?

*October 15:* Disturbed and agitated as I have been for the past few days, tonight I decided something had to be done. I went to speak to Father Antoniou.

Nitsa, that shrew, has been at the restaurant for several days now acting as if nothing had happened. She joked with the customers and took cash calmly. Heartless wench without the decency to show some shred of remorse!

Last night I slept locked in the bathroom. Even then I was apprehensive and kept one eye open on the door. While it was true that by her immoral standards we were even, she could not be trusted. I feared she would take it into her stony soul to surge into a shameful lead. Finally tonight, because I knew the situation had become intolerable, I visited the priest.

He greeted me courteously and took me into his study. He brought out a bottle of good sherry. We sat silent for a moment, sipping the fine vintage.

"You may speak now, my dear friend," he said gently. "You are troubled."

"How can you tell, Father?" I asked.

He smiled sagely. He was indeed a fountain of wisdom.

"Well, Father," I struggled for the mortifying words. "It is Nitsa. To put it plainly, she has struck me not once, but twice, with a stout stick and a heavy pot."

He sat upright in his chair.

"May God watch over us!" he said. "Surely, Vasili, you are jesting!"

I made my cross and bent my head to show him the hard lump that still dwelt there. He rose from his chair and came to examine it. When he touched the lump, I jumped.

He paced the floor in agitation, his black cassock swirling about his ankles.

"She must be demented," he said slowly. "The poor girl must be losing her mind."

"That is what I thought at first," I said seriously. "But she seems so calm. Each time she strikes me she merely says, 'I owed you one.'"

"Aaaaah!" the priest said eagerly. "Now we approach the core of truth." His voice lowered. "What did you do to her for which she seeks revenge?" He winked slyly. "I know you hot-blooded Spartans. Perhaps a little too passionate for a shy young girl?"

"Nothing, Father!" I said in indignation, although I could not help being pleased at his suggestion. "Absolutely nothing."

"Nothing?" he repeated.

"I have clouted her several times across her head," I said. "My prerogative as a husband to discipline my wife. Certainly nothing to warrant the violence of her blows."

"Incredible," the priest said. He sat silent and thoughtful, then shook his head. "A woman raising her hand to her husband in my parish, and that woman my niece. Incredible!" He wrung his hands fretfully. "A stain upon the sacred vows of marriage." He paused as if struck by a sudden thought. "Tell me, Vasili, has she been watching much television? Sometimes it tends to confuse a woman."

"Our picture tube is burned out now several months, Father," I said.

"Incredible," the priest said.

"Perhaps if you talk to her, Father," I said. "Explain what it is to be a dutiful wife. Define the rights of a husband."

The priest shook his head sadly. "When I first entered the priesthood," he said somberly, "I learned never to attempt to reason with a woman. The two words should never be used in the same sentence. The emancipation of these crafty scheming descendants of Eve has hurled man into a second Dark Ages."

I was impressed by the gravity of his words and had to agree I had spoken hastily.

"My son," the priest said finally, a thin edge of desperation in his voice. "I confess I am helpless to know what to advise. If you came to seek counsel because she drank to excess or because she had succumbed to the wiles of another man . . . but for this! I will have to contact the Bishop."

I sipped my sherry and felt anger coming to a head on my flesh as if it were a festered boil pressing to break. I, Vasili Makris, subjected to these indignities! Humiliated before my own dishwasher! Driving my parish priest to consult with the Bishop!

"There is only one answer, Father," I said, and my voice rang out boldly, a Homeric call to battle. "I have clouted her too lightly. There is nothing further to be done but for me to give her a beating she will not forget!" I waved my hand. "Rest assured I will remember my own strength. I will not break any bones, but I will teach her respect." I became more pleased with that solution by the moment. "That is the answer, Father," I said. "A beating that will once and for all end this insufferable mutiny!"

We watched each other for a long wordless moment. I could sense that good man struggling between a moral objection to violence and an awareness there was no other way.

"They who live by the sword," he said dolefully, and he paused to permit me to finish the quotation in my mind. "This cancer must be cut out," he said, "before it spreads infection through the parish."

He raised his glass of wine and toasted me gravely.

"Consider yourself embarked on a holy crusade," he said in a voice trembling with emotion. "Recapture the sanctity of your manhood. Go, Vasili Makris, with God."

I kissed his revered hand and left.

*October 17:* The promised retribution has been delayed because a waitress has been sick and I cannot afford to incapacitate Nitsa at the same time. But I vow her reprieve will be brief!

*October 19:* Tonight is the night! The restaurant is closed and we are alone. I am sitting in the kitchen making this entry while she finishes cleaning out the urns of coffee. When the work is all done I will call her into the kitchen for judgment.

Nitsa! Misguided and arrogant woman, your hour of punishment is here!

*October 23:* In the life of every noble man there are moments of decisive discovery and events of inspired revelation. I hasten with fire and zeal to record such an experience in this Journal!

That epic night when Nitsa came to the kitchen of the restaurant after finishing her work, without a word of warning I struck her. Quick as a flash she struck me back. I was prepared for that and hit her harder. She replied with a thump on my head that staggered me. I threw all hesitation to the winds and landed a fierce blow upon her. Instead of submitting, she became a flame of baleful fury. She twisted violently in search of some weapon to implement her rage, and scooped up a meat cleaver off the block! I let out a hoarse shout of panic and turned desperately and fled! I heard her pounding like a maddened mare after me, and I made the door leading to the alley and bounded out with a wild cry! I forgot completely the accursed stairs and spun like a top in the air and landed on my head. I woke in the hospital where I am at present and X-rays have indicated no damage beyond a possible concussion that still causes me some dizziness.

At the first opportunity I examined myself secretly for additional reassurance that some vital part of me had not been dismembered by that frightful cleaver. Then I sat and recollected each detail of that experience with somber horror. A blow now and then, delivered in good faith, is one of the prerogatives of marriage. Malevolent assault and savage butchery are quite another matter!

However, as my first sense of appalled outrage and angry resentment passed, I found the entire situation developing conclusive compensations. I had fancied myself married to a mortal woman and instead I

was united to a Goddess, a fierce Diana, a cyclonic Juno! I realized with a shock of recognition that one eagle had found another, perched on Olympian peaks, high above the obscure valley of pigeons and sheep.

O fortunate woman! You have gained my mercy and forbearance and have proven to my satisfaction that you deserve my virile love and are worthy of my intrepid manhood!

Nitsa, rejoice! You need no longer tremble or fear that I will ever strike you again!

# Author

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